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Profile Interview With Faculty Mentor Lalatendu Acharya

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PROFILE INTERVIEW WITH FACULTY MENTOR LALATENDU ACHARYA

Jill Inderstrodt-Stephens, College of Liberal Arts, College of Health and Human Sciences

STUDENT AUTHOR BIOGRAPHY

Jill Inderstrodt-Stephens is a second-year student in the dual-degree health communication PhD/MPH program at Purdue University. She has taken both International Health and Qualitative Methods in Health Disparities classes from Dr. Acharya, who is on her dissertation committee. Jill served in the United States Peace Corps twice, leading health-based community programs, and is naturally drawn toward promoting service-learning pedagogies. She uses community engagement widely in her work as Associate Professor of Communication at Ivy Tech Community College in Indianapolis.

FACULTY MEMBER BIOGRAPHY

Dr. Lalatendu Acharya is an assistant professor of consumer science in the College of Health and Human Sciences at Purdue University, where he teaches undergraduate classes in selling and sales management and graduate classes in consumer health and health disparities. As a graduate of Purdue's Brian Lamb School of Communication, consumer science was an appropriate fit for Dr. Acharya, based on his research interests and desire to better inform health consumers. Originally from India, Dr. Acharya earned his undergraduate degree in physics from Utkal University and his MBA from Xavier University, both in India. Prior to receiving his PhD in health communication from Purdue in 2011, Dr. Acharya worked for UNICEF as head of their communications division in the state of Orissa, India. In addition to other work, he conducted participatory educational projects in rural Indian villages. It was this hands-on, participant-

focused work that motivated Acharya's service-learning pedagogy and integration of service-learning concepts and activities into his teaching at Purdue.

A natural teacher, Dr. Acharya taught university classes in sales and marketing part-time while in India, and later taught communication, advertising, and persuasion classes as a graduate student instructor at Purdue. He loves teaching, and his students and advisees appreciate his hands-on, collaborative approach and the extent of his knowledge of health topics. Dr. Acharya turns every class-related task into a learning experience. He is married and has one daughter, who will be attending college next year. He enjoys music, cooking, and spending time with his energetic pet Corgi, Mickey.

Dr. Acharya responds to student presentations during Fundamentals of Relationship Selling, an undergraduate consumer science course.

SERVICE-LEARNING COURSE

Dr. Acharya integrates service-learning activities in his course, Fundamentals of Relationship Selling, a 300-level undergraduate consumer science course comprised primarily of selling and sales management majors. The foundation of this course is a semester-long project in which small groups of students choose a community partner (profit or nonprofit) and work with them to identify their critical organizational needs, write a sales plan to address the needs, and present it to the organization. Students are evaluated on multiple tasks, including class presentations, their written sales plans, a final analysis and presentation, and feedback from their community partner.

Dr. Acharya chose this course as the primary site of his service-learning pedagogy because of the course's focus on relationships:

The traditional setup of the dominant service-learning pedagogy has been with nonprofits, but here I was with a class that talked about sales and business. So how do we adapt it to a service-learning pedagogy? I thought about it, and I decided that in my service-learning philosophy for that class, the students will choose a community organization or business of their choice, and they will work to identify the needs of the organization, later developing a sales plan to meet those needs.

Because of the interpersonal nature of the selling relationship, Dr. Acharya imagined that this type of project would prompt students to build rapport with a community partner, sustain the relationship by accurately finding and meeting the partner's needs, and face relationship challenges under the supervision of a talented mentor. Building and sustaining this relationship as part of the course's curriculum allows students to make mistakes in relationship-building without the dire consequences of the actual marketplace. Additionally, students learn group communication and workplace skills as they negotiate the project components as a team.

Over eight semesters of teaching the course, Dr. Acharya has developed critical relationships with these community partners, some of whom have participated in projects for multiple semesters. Navigating the relationship between the University and community has prompted Dr. Acharya to consider a pilot semester during which one group will work with a long-time partner, picking up where the previous semester's group left off, and one group will choose a new partner and construct

Students present initial findings of their community-based project during Dr. Acharya's Fundamentals of Relationship Selling undergraduate seminar.

a unique sales plan. Dr. Acharya is interested to see if picking up an ongoing project will be more beneficial to the organizations.

Dr. Acharya's attempts at instituting service-learning haven't been without challenges. Because service-learning as a teaching philosophy is just gaining traction in the Purdue community, some students and faculty have trouble conceptualizing community-based learning as necessary. The nature of interpersonal relationships dictates that some student-partner pairs will encounter conflict or poor communication. Additionally, busy Purdue students are pressed for time, leading to partner-student relationships that are difficult to maintain after the student has completed the class. Dr. Acharya finds that any hesitancy students feel at the beginning of the class disintegrates as students become engaged with their community partners. Students overwhelmingly give the course and Dr. Acharya high evaluations. He feels fortunate to have the support of his department head and other consumer science faculty. Dr. Acharya is considering adding community-based work to his graduate classes in health disparities, as he has strong working relationships with several local mental health and food-based organizations.

COMMUNITY PARTNERS AND CLIENTS

The YWCA of Greater Lafayette has partnered with students for multiple semesters on domestic violence prevention and education projects. Other organizations range from bars in Chauncey Village, to Big Brothers Big Sisters, to Virtuous Cycles, a family-owned bike shop in town. Initially, students seek out these organizations, but Dr. Acharya maintains the relationships over

the semesters so that future students can work with them. Dr. Acharya contacts some organizations prior to the project, such as City Foods Co-Op, and some are identified and developed by the students themselves.

Most barriers to working with community partners come not from the community organizations, but from the students themselves, as Dr. Acharya points out:

The basic challenge I have with my students is for them to understand this process of teaching and learning, and also for them to negotiate their way with the community organization or business they are working with. Many times the students, when faced with the process of working with something like food insecurity or domestic violence, need a moment to adjust and negotiate themselves into a position in which they can learn and reflect.

In order to ensure that the student-developed sales plan addresses the organization's needs, Dr. Acharya relies on the students to build strong relationships in order to determine needs, and relates this back to the selling fundamentals on which the course is based:

I tell them to treat these organizations as a customer, and to find their needs. So we work through finding those needs, and we view it like a sales consultant. Then we work to fulfill those needs by forming a plan for them. If the customer agrees, we try to implement the plan. Through this experiential service-learning process, students are also able to map the contents they learn in the course to the situation that they are facing.

Dr. Acharya rarely meets resistance from community organizations, but he finds that working alongside the students himself to build the relationship with the partner can be quite helpful. He also finds that when he explains the situation to them, they are willing to build a mutually beneficial relationship. Addressing community organization concerns about privacy, for example, can further build lasting relationships: "With difficult objectives such as domestic violence, there are a lot of constraints, but we manage to work through them."

REFLECTION AND CONCLUSION

Dr. Acharya's five semesters of integrating service-learning into his undergraduate class have contributed much to his understanding of the way service-learning can function in a classroom. He is prepared to add service-learning activities in his other classes, particularly those at the graduate level. More pressing is his plan to fine-tune his current relationship sales course curriculum in order to maximize the assistance the Fundamentals of Relationship Selling course can provide the community. As a Purdue IMPACT (Instruction Matters: Purdue Academic Course Transformation) fellow, he is currently redesigning the course and the service-learning assignment and is relying on the expertise of colleagues in the service-learning community at Purdue. "I feel it's vital," he says, "particularly in learning the sales process, for students to work with a real client, learn the value of establishing rapport, probe and work with real organizational needs, objections, and propose a sales plan."

Dr. Acharya believes that faculty who enact a service-learning philosophy in their classrooms can influence others to consider adopting a service-learning approach, since most faculty want what they teach in their classrooms to have real-world implications. "I've seen a lot of faculty who have these kinds of projects, but don't know it's service-learning," he notes. "We're all so busy; it's a question of gaining their interest, and as well as the interest of the department. If we have institutional policy in which they look at the number of service-learning courses in each department and college, and link it with a college and department metrics, then faculty will be more inclined to design more community-based experiences for students."

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